

Canada p 12, 14

unpublished

SPEECH

DELIVERED IN

THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, JUNE 17, 1870,

BY

W. M. TORRENS,

M.P. FOR FINSBURY,

ON THE

PREVAILING WANT OF EMPLOYMENT
IN GREAT TOWNS,

AND THE

POLICY OF PROVIDING CHEAP AND
UNIFORM RATES OF CHARGE FOR EMIGRANTS
TO THE COLONIES.

LONDON:

PUBLISHED BY MESSRS TRÜBNER AND CO.,
60 PATERNOSTER ROW.

1870.

LP
F5012
1870
T6915

The EDITH and LORNE PIERCE
COLLECTION *of* CANADIANA



Queen's University at Kingston

Per for CP

To 115 Dec 5 1900

12.00

24/1/69

12.00 24 1/169

SPEECH BY MR TORRENS.

HOUSE OF COMMONS, 17TH JUNE.

On the order of the day for going into Committee of Supply,

Mr W. M. TORRENS rose to move "That the continued want of employment among those who live by waged labour in many of the great towns of the kingdom calls for the special consideration of this House, with a view to the means that may best be devised for the remedy of the same without delay," and, after referring to two petitions on the subject which he had received for presentation, he said, on that midsummer eve, when the weather was comparatively genial, when the town was full, and there were various alternatives of temporary occupation that helped men to forget the long interval of involuntary idleness, with all its attendant privation, through which they had passed, the House was free from that direct pressure of importunity and alarm which at an earlier period of the Session might have been said to interfere with their dispassionate judgment in the matter. But great classes of the community, both ratepayers and working men, had suffered bitterly last winter and the winter preceding, and all the inquiries he had been able to make confirmed him in the opinion that there were no new openings for trade in the winter that was approaching sufficient to give any guarantee against the recurrence of like misery. He also feared that the Poor-Law returns did not indicate that great improvement which would, if the logic of such statistics were admitted, discharge this House from the responsibility which many felt regarding the next six months. He was not going to discuss the administration of the Poor Law, and he asked the House to consider the question of the want of employment wholly apart from the question of poor-rates and pauperism. What the House had to provide for and deal

For the Poor Law

with was not that class which, being from various circumstances broken down, came upon the rates for relief, but those who were able to work, who wished for work, and who had not work to do. Three or four months had been spent by Parliament in securing the means of living to Irish tenants, and a million of money was to be devoted to this purpose by the State. Again, New Zealand had become discontented and alienated, and sooner than suffer that sore to canker, substantial help had been given by the State in order to promote emigration and afford employment in that colony. Government had in their possession proofs which they probably were wise not to produce, and which he was not about to call for, of the extent to which, in the case of New Zealand, alienation had gone : and they knew too well the degree in which the feelings of the people of Ireland had become estranged before measures of concession were resolved on. Surely, if Ireland and New Zealand, being on the brink of disaffection, had been so generously dealt with, it was not unreasonable to ask the House to consider what could be done, though not in the way of lavish grants, to improve the condition of classes of our countrymen who were certainly as peaceable and as little importunate as these. (Hear, hear.) There was conclusive evidence to prove that unexampled poverty had prevailed for the last three years in the great towns of the kingdom ; that that poverty, though at present alleviated, was likely to recur ; that it was aggravated every day by the mere natural increment of population ; and, as had been well said by a rev. friend of his, "this distress did not arise from any mere oscillation of trade, but was one of those great changes in the progress of surplus population with which, sooner or later, Parliament would be obliged to deal." He took a recent opportunity of consulting the Registrar-General, who said there was no reason to expect in the next decennial period that there would be any falling off in the increase of our population, which was now going on at the rate of 1,000 a day. The pressure occasioned by this increase was concentrated in the larger towns of the United Kingdom, whose aggregate population had risen enormously in recent years. He held in his hand a table verified during the present week by the signature of the Registrar-General, from which it appeared that in the last nineteen years the population of the twenty largest towns (counting the metropolis as but one) had risen from 5,225,000 to 7,216,000 ; so

that at a very moderate computation the increase in these great centres of population would be found by the census of next year to amount to considerably more than two millions. But the total increase in the realm in the same period would appear to be about three millions and a half. There was, therefore, little reason to doubt that when they had the figures of the fifteen or twenty next largest cities, it would be found that the whole of the additional population of the kingdom was concentrated in the towns. Formerly this was not the case, but of late years Ireland and some agricultural counties in England, as well as many of the smaller country towns, had steadily decreased in population. He would not discuss the causes which had led to this important change in our vital statistics. The successive alterations made in the law of chargeability had, he believed, a great deal to do with it. Modifications in our system of trade had in some places a great deal more. All he desired was that note should be taken of the fact as one that was essential. If the large towns had become the places where great fortunes were to be made, they were also the places where great masses of poverty were accumulated. Now, this was the question to which he had to ask the serious attention of the House. He hoped that question would not be evaded by the attempt to raise any false issue as to the general causes of increasing poverty. He had heard it sometimes said that if there were no trades' unions the people would be all employed, well off, and contented. He had never spoken a sentence or written a line in favour of resort to strikes, which had frequently, he believed, done much harm. But the man must be profoundly ignorant of the actual condition of things around him who believed that they were to be accounted for mainly, or to any important extent, by misdirected combinations among workmen. Their total number in the United Kingdom had been estimated at upwards of 5,000,000; while the minority enrolled in trades' unions of all kinds did not exceed 800,000; and of these it was notorious that a large proportion had not for many years been engaged in any contention with their employers. Take Birmingham for example, which was said to be the place where unionism was weakest, and where accordingly he might be told that employment was good. He rejoiced to believe that, comparatively speaking, it was so. But

what was the testimony he had received within the present week, from two of the most intelligent and reliable persons in that town? They were both well known to his honourable friend (Mr Dixon), who was their representative; and he would attest the value of any statements made by them. The Clerk to the Guardians, replying to a letter of inquiry from one whom he could have no other desire than impartially and correctly to inform, wrote:

There is a considerable number of persons unemployed, who will not apply to the guardians: for the most part artizans. Many would emigrate if aided, themselves paying a small sum per head.

The editor of an influential journal corroborates this view:

The gun trade, he says, is very bad, and is not likely to grow better. Of 4,000 engaged in this trade more than half are unemployed, and will remain so till they can be drafted off into other callings. These are not paupers, and if they take parish relief, they only do so under severe pressure. Many would emigrate if aided, supplying part of the means themselves. I receive daily inquiries from workmen about emigration agencies, rates of passage, &c. The same observation applies to the districts round, and to the Black Country. Any information about the colonies or the United States is eagerly caught at. There is no town in which unionism is so weak as in Birmingham.

Neither was it just to ascribe the prevailing want of work to the evils caused by drinking or betting, which latter he had reason to fear was an increasing habit, and one much to be deplored. (Hear, hear.) But it was well known that gambling was most indulged in where work was plenty and wages high; and as for intoxication, he would endorse unreservedly the thoughtful and just expression in a letter he had received that morning from the Rev. Mr Temple, incumbent of Upper Kennington, in which, after lamenting the want of profitable labour which existed even now, and the prospect of its grievous aggravation in the later months of the year, said:

I cannot attribute all distress as arising from excessive drinking, as is sometimes done, because I believe distress occasioned by want of work, depresses the mind and leads to the habit of lulling trouble by drink; and this does not prevail only among the labouring classes, but in a more refined manner is to be found in the higher ranks of society.

But to whatever extent misery was caused by evil habits, where was the class among them without sin entitled to cast the first stone, when the casting of that stone meant a sentence of death? He held in his hand a mass of corre-

spondence from clergymen, employers, and physicians of all shades of opinion, and all spoke of the deep distress prevailing throughout the metropolis last winter.

Dr Lee, All Saints, Lambeth, said :

A very considerable number would be only too thankful to emigrate from this parish could they see their way to do so. I have never known such misery among the lower classes as they endured last winter; and it amazes me that statesmen do not insist upon a Government scheme of emigration to the colonies.

Mr Owen, St Jude's, Chelsea, said :

One-third of all trades are out of work, except the mendicant trade, which flourishes most when it is notorious that there is least work to be had. The well-known want of employment is an indirect endorsement of fraud. Whether failing commerce or surplus population be the cause, emigration meets both difficulties. There is no other remedial proposal so easy, so cheap, so otherwise desirable, as an extensive organisation to send men to where there is land on which to live by their labour. If Government would make an emigration loan advance, to be repaid after given periods, thousands would avail themselves of the boon, who soon will be a costly and dangerous burthen on local rates or public charity.

The Rev. T. Nolan, of Regent Square, wrote : " Out of a population of 11,000 there are 1,300 families depending on waged labour, the half of whom have not regular work."

The poverty of this part of London is coming in like an armed man. Desultory efforts no longer yield even a temporary mitigation. Government must grapple with the evil. The question is not of alms but of productive work, the want of which among skilled labourers is not so great as among unskilled. But a third of these have been without work last winter for three or four months. Of the shoemakers the greater part had only occasional employment during the winter. Five hundred are day labourers, of whom a third are unemployed three or four months. Tradesmen complain of want of business, ratepayers are greatly burdened, and general depression prevails.

A partner in one of the largest building firms in the metropolis, who was one of the best educated and most intelligent men he was acquainted with, told him the other day that their wages-book showed payments last year and this of more than a thousand guineas a week less than they had been three or four years ago; that he saw no prospect whatever of trade reviving, and that he could have to-morrow hundreds of men if he wanted them, able and willing to work, both artisans and labourers. The gentleman in question did not happen to agree with him (Mr Torrens) in all his views of emigration; and he made his opponents, whoever they might be, a present of the admission.

On the other hand, he must add that his friend had frankly said to him, "I know that we are no worse off than other large houses, and that if asked they all would say very much the same." This was in Bloomsbury. In another district, one that seemed among the most favoured in many respects,—he meant the pleasant and healthful region lying between Highgate and the more densely-peopled portion of the town,—another employer, Mr Wiltshire, wrote to him thus :

During the last winter I know from my own knowledge that many industrious artizans and labourers were driven to the stone-yard in order to provide food for their families. In several instances I recognised men who had worked for me in the building trade, who begged me to give them work to relieve them from the degradation of taking parish money. A man who had worked for me as a foreman bricklayer, came and implored me to give him labour of any sort, so as to take him from where he was working for 1s. 6d. a day. But my building work has been stopped for months, and it will be a long time before any builder in Islington can recommence operations. In Holloway alone, which is about a fourth of the parish, there are about 1,600 houses unfinished or empty. Though the population of the parish has increased in the last ten years from 153,000 to 240,000, many of the small shopkeepers are reduced to the greatest poverty, and hardly able to pay the heavy rates imposed on them, and in hundreds of instances the vestry is obliged to excuse them. In February and March last year we gave out-door relief to 35,000, and in the same months this year to 59,000 poor.

Mr Timewell, who has also been largely engaged in building, and who takes an active part in local affairs, corroborates this despondent view, illustrating the downward progress of the district in economic condition by the striking fact that whereas the amount of property assessed for the relief of the poor has about doubled between 1856 and 1870, the amount given in out-door relief had been augmented fivefold. Dr Ballard, referring to the reports made by him as Medical Officer of Health, observes :

I have pointed out the enormous increase of sickness which seeks relief from public sources, arising out of the distress of the labouring classes from lack of work, and altogether disproportionate to our increase of population. In 1865 I recorded 29,098 cases of sickness ; in 1867, 34,692 ; and in 1868, 41,077. Last winter the destitution, from lack of work, came very prominently before me when relapsing fever broke out among the labouring class. Nearly all were in a state of semi-starvation, which was most painful to witness ; and I visited every family. The complaint of the men was that they could get no work, of the women, who kept stalls, that they had no customers. The want of food and firing in the bitter weather obviously led to the extension of the disease, to repeated relapses, and to a prolonged debility after conva-

lescence. Our public sickness still continues very high for the season; the cost of food is rising, and unless some anticipatory measures be adopted, I look forward to next winter with dread.

He assured him (Mr Torrens) that in many other suburban districts a similar state of things was to be found, and that from experience and observation he was confident no change for the better was at hand. It would be no answer to say that, although all this might be true of the metropolis with its three millions of people, Leeds was busy and the vale of Cleveland was bright with the glow of iron furnaces. The prosperity of one district was of no avail to cure the permanent wretchedness of another. He warned the House against being misled by averages on such a subject as this. There could be no question of averages between the rich and the poor, between the healthy and the sick, or between the wretched and the happy. It was an absurdity to tell a suffering man that he could not be very ill because his neighbours were enjoying good health. It was no reason against him when a house was on fire to say that there was not a sign of smoke from the opposite chimney. They might do well to take averages of exports and imports, of rates and taxes, of railways and telegraphs, but it was cruel and stupid nonsense to talk of average health, hunger, or despair. It was the duty of the House to disregard all arguments founded upon such shallow calculations, and to do their best to prevent any class of the community becoming destitute, and, therefore, desperate. He did not ask the Government to provide work for a single man, or to do anything which could in any way be regarded as bordering on socialism, but he asked them to deal with the working and the lower middle classes of this country in the same way as they had dealt with the people of New Zealand and of Ireland. A relieving officer in Bethnal Green wrote to him that they were inundated with surplus labour from the agricultural districts. The changes in the law that had been made of late years had rendered the great towns the drainage for the unemployed of the provinces, who were becoming a source of danger and demoralisation. An East End incumbent, the Rev. Mr Caparn, says:

From my own knowledge, and from information obtained from reliable sources, I believe more than half my people are unemployed, or not following their old employments. Many who were earning 50s. to 60s. per week, as well as less skilled labourers, are

glad to unload barges or obtain any casual employment, and the number that are able to obtain work do not earn sufficient to support their families—the majority barely exist, and of some it is a puzzle to know how they keep body and soul together. I do not think there are many in my parish who have been immediately connected with strikes, though some, no doubt, have injured themselves in that way. For the last four years my people have suffered terribly, and notwithstanding the indiscriminate charity which has been given, and which has done much harm, the distress is rather increasing than diminishing." Mr Caparn would rejoice in any remedy, but though he has assisted in Emigration, he fears it alone will not do. He ends by asking, "Are there not vast quantities of waste land in Great Britain that might be made to produce food for our increasing population?"

He would add one more testimony, but it was that of a man whom he was sure the Prime Minister would not undervalue. The Rev. Dr Miller, of Greenwich, wrote :

My strong conviction, which has for some time been deepening, is that this question, "How to deal with the unemployed," will, ere long, be the most urgent social question of the day. That very many are willing to emigrate if aided, not as paupers, is certain. I fear the want of employment will continue. Scarcity, and a hard winter, would probably bring the matter to a grave point.

So much for the metropolis. Now as to the other towns, Mr Russell, the able conductor of one of the Liverpool journals, said :

This is a city of refuge, or colossal workhouse, for all many miles round, and for thousands from Ireland; anything which would deplete the labour market elsewhere would greatly reduce the distress in this town. Casual labour ought to be organised here in order to avert suffering in bad times, which comes suddenly, and often lasts too long. Emigration would lessen the supply of cheap casual labour, which brokers like to have dangling about, of course. It is more popular with working men than with them.

Mr Samuelson, brother of the honourable member for Banbury, said :

During a great part of the year there is a very large amount of superfluous labour in the cotton and general produce markets. Only when favourable winds bring in a fleet of vessels is there full employment. One large cotton broking firm employs fifty regular hands as porters and weight takers, and ninety casually. Eleven months out of twelve, they have no difficulty in engaging these hands at an hour's notice. Their warehouseman tells me that at two o'clock on most days he could go on 'Change and engage 500 hands in a very short time. Some ascribe the superfluity of labour to what they call high wages, which tempt men, they say, to flock into town during a flush of work; and which being soon spent the men are unable to leave. I think what is wanted is a higher rate of wages, to compensate for casual employment, and a well managed trades' union to regulate labour and counter-

act the influence of public-house-keeping warehousemen. A respectable man will, at any time, prefer 21s. a-week, with regular work, to the vicissitudes of a dock porter's life with 4s. a-day. The facility with which extra hands are obtained, owing to the rapid influx of men when there is a flush of work, is not only the cause of frequent distress, but is indicative of a widespread superabundance of labour elsewhere.

The Mayor of Southampton endorsed the following statement:

The Poor-Law Returns give an average of men out of employment. But by far the larger number of persons would not have been in receipt of relief, and consequently I have no means of ascertaining their number. The Poor-Law statistics would not give you a tenth part of the numbers out of employment.

Next Session the House must be prepared to have this question of the unemployed more fully discussed. It was becoming every day of more and more importance. Wild dreams were being indulged in, and desperate expedients were being mooted with the view of meeting the difficulty. As he ventured the other day to tell a noble lord, who was better acquainted, perhaps, than any man of his order with the true condition of the people,—"You who have good estates to lose or keep, had need to look to it betimes: the devil is looking over the wall;" and his noble friend replied, "I know it, and have often said so." He had been asked upon what ground he could advise Parliament to levy a tax for the benefit of a particular class, but he did not ask for a single shilling. The tax was already levied; he asked only that it should be adjusted. If there were a large number of people out of employment, and if they did not find their way to the workhouse, they must live upon the wages of others; and it was so. The poor would not see their neighbours dying from starvation without helping them; and besides this, the poor rates were levied most unjustly. He knew of two proprietors, who drew from 30,000*l.* to 40,000*l.* a year from house property in Finsbury, and were not assessed a shilling to the local rates. As absentees they did not see the poverty of the district, and were therefore not prompted to charity. The remedy for this would not be found in any adjustment of local burdens. He recently met a distinguished friend often consulted by the Government upon the subject of commercial legislation, who asked him why, instead of requiring State interference in reference to surplus labour by means of emigration, they did not ask for the means of opening new

markets to labour by negotiating the reciprocal abatement of Customs duties, which stood in the way of greater intercourse with other countries. But the truth was that they who proposed State aid to emigration had been the most constant advocates of the free-trade alternative, on which his friend Sir Louis Mallet in preference relied. All through last autumn and winter they had not failed to press upon the attention of the Government the policy of equalising the duties on wines, which would not only cause a great expansion of trade with the Peninsular States, but with our own colonies of Australia and South Africa. The Ministers of Spain and Portugal had long been urging the admission of their wines on the same terms as those of France, and only the other day he (Mr Torrens) had introduced a deputation of Cape and Australian merchants to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for the purpose of pressing upon him the expediency of the change, and the right honourable gentleman had told them that the question had been considered, and that the thing could not be done. This was not the time to discuss the grounds of that determination; but if the alternative of new markets was closed against them, they had all the more right and reason to ask that some other should be sought and if possible found. He thought that it ought to be impressed upon the Government that they were wrong in leaving the outflow of labour undirected. The report of the Emigration Commissioners showed that of 167,000 British-born subjects who left this country last year, no fewer than 133,000 proceeded to the United States. It was, he believed, a great error not to endeavour to prevent this. (Hear, hear.) He was as hearty a friend of America as any man in that House, and could look back with satisfaction to the services he had rendered in preserving amity between the two countries; but he loved his own country best, and had little sympathy or respect for

The steady patriot of the world alone,
The friend of every country but his own.

(Cheers.) If we desired to hold the empire together, we ought, while we had spare hands and the colonies had spare lands, to marry the land to the labour and the labour to the land. Canada was able and willing to receive between 20,000 and 30,000 men, and yet we allowed people to remain here weltering in their misery. He, for one, would not advocate what was called "sending"

men out of the country, because he did not think that was our business at all ; but our duty was to strike down the toll-bars between this country and every other part of her Majesty's dominions. (Hear, hear.) Above a million of money was annually voted in subsidies nominally for the postal service, but practically for the provision of floating hotels for the great comfort and expedition of first and second-class travellers. Those subsidies were professedly granted for postal reasons, but they had the inevitable effect of combining great luxury with great speed for those persons who were able to travel at high pressure and at great expense. Why, then, should not the working classes have their fair share of the advantages of improved transit ? In every Railway Bill a provision was inserted that there should be third-class carriages, and why should we not have, in like manner, third-class ships ? Doing this would naught impoverish capital, while it would make labour rich indeed. He would plant in the heart of every working man a fresh root of hope, of self-help, of loyalty. He would enfranchise him with something better than any mere political privilege,—the sense that when he woke in the morning of life, and found the sky dark and the air chill, and work scanty around him, he might by thrift and care in a short time gather enough to purchase for himself, under the provisions of a great and merciful law, the right to pass the limit of his parish, of his town, or even of this old kingdom, and go forth to seek wealth and fortune, health and content, in whatever region and whatever zone there were lands untilled within the allegiance of the Queen. (Cheers.) It would be possible, without any appreciable increase of national burdens, to enable many thousand families to emigrate, who, for want of material aid, were now unable to do so. Each adult should pay 3*l.*, and each child over twelve years of age 30*s.* For this they should obtain a family passage warrant to Quebec, Victoria, or Natal, as the case might be. The difference in each case might be made up in the following manner : One portion should be defrayed from the Imperial Exchequer, one from the revenue of the colony, and one out of a fund to be created by way of colonial loan guaranteed by the Home Government. The portions would not always be the same, but, taking all things into account, he thought the advantages and capabilities of contribution might fairly be considered equal. No plan, of course, could be wholly free from ob-

jection which attempted to deal with a problem so complicated, and one the elements of which were in several respects so diverse. But, at least, that which he desired to recommend might afford a way of escape from perilous uncertainty as to the means of livelihood to great numbers of industrious and respectable persons at present existing in daily deepening fear of absolute want. It would, on the other hand, supply Canada and Australia with the hands they more than ever need on terms much easier than, as far as he knew, had ever been heretofore suggested. He would have the Imperial Executive authorised to give the option to any colony whose circumstances rendered it suitable for emigration from this country; and he would in every case give the colonial agent resident here a veto in the selection of passengers by these "third-class trains across the ocean." Each colony would be left to judge for itself from year to year what addition to its population it could helpfully assimilate and absorb, and there would be no great difficulty in adapting the supply to the varying demand under this elastic system. The working men had given abundant evidence that they were ready to pinch themselves in order to accumulate 3*l.* a head, and thereby prove they were not paupers. If this boon were refused them, who would convince them that they were duly represented in that House? Many of the colonies would be willing to contribute an equal sum for each approved emigrant; and we of our abundance ought to contribute the remainder. The adoption of such a scheme would tend more than anything else to knit together the different portions of the empire. He would not then discuss the policy pursued by his noble friend at the head of the Colonial Department of withdrawing our troops from the colonies; but surely if we withdrew force we ought to plant affection. (Hear.) Those who went to the colonies would become customers for our manufactures, on which the tariff of the United States imposed a duty of from 30 to 70 per cent. It might, perhaps, be urged that the magnitude of our exports was an answer to his complaints, but he would remind the House that history recorded instances of great wealth existing side by side with great misery and want. By the mercy of Providence we were singularly happy in having many untried regions where we might most advantageously employ both capital and labour, and he was convinced that by a wise,

judicious, and kind application of our laws and financial arrangements, we might facilitate the outflow of capital and labour to the extended sphere of British dominion, and at the same time confer unmitigated blessings upon this country. (Cheers.)

The motion was seconded by Lord George Hamilton, and supported by Sir J. Lawrence, Mr Hornby, and Mr Newdegate. It was met by Mr Goschen, on the part of the Government, with a direct negative, the right honourable gentleman denying the facts stated and the inferences drawn from them. It was likewise opposed by Mr Pease and Mr Fothergill.

On the motion of Mr W. H. Smith, the debate was adjourned.